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TAGS: PREL PGOV MOPS IS LE

SUBJECT: DEPUTY DEFENSE MINISTER SNEH COMMENTS ON THE MOD BUDGET, LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE LEBANON WAR

REF: TEL AVIV 4995

Classified By: Ambassador Richard H. Jones, Reason 1.4 (b) (d)

¶1. (S) During a December 26 meeting with the Ambassador (discussion of efforts to remove obstacles to movement in the West Bank and other issues reported reftel), Deputy Defense Minister Efraim Sneh candidly discussed the MOD's dissatisfaction with the 2007 budget as well as the IDF's lessons learned from last summer's war in Lebanon. Sneh said the GOI's 2007 budget currently under discussion in the Knesset reduced the defense appropriation to NIS 35 billion, which he stated was not enough to cover the need to reequip the IDF and simultaneously address homeland security needs. Specifically, Sneh commented, taking into consideration intelligence assessments that a war with Syria may occur in spring or summer 2007 and given Syria's extensive stockpiles of chemical weapons and delivery systems, a substantial investment in new gas masks and other expenditures on protecting the home front is critical. He said he and Defense Minister Peretz would see what could be done in the Knesset to increase the defense budget. Sneh added that he blamed former Finance Minister and opposition leader Bibi Netanyahu, who cut the MOD's budget in the previous government, arguing at the time that there was no longer a strategic threat to Israel after Saddam Hussein's removal from power.

¶2. (S) The Ambassador asked about a flurry of local media reports the previous week that pressure is building on Chief of General Staff Dan Halutz to resign due to extensive criticism of the General Staff's performance contained in a number of internal IDF after-action assessments. Sneh said there was now a "healthy atmosphere" at the MOD and "no reason for bad blood." In his view, Halutz was leading the IDF's assessment process and was not guilty of negligence. He concluded that the pressure on Halutz to resign was diminishing.

¶3. (S) Sneh said the real lessons of the war were that changes in Israeli society had spilled over into the IDF. In a more materialistic society, there was less prestige for military officers and the best people were no longer opting for a military career. In addition, the IDF had made the mistake of "trading good leadership for lousy management." As a result, senior officers were reluctant to take responsibility. The IDF's core values of courage and

fraternity of arms remained strong, however. Another problem revealed in Lebanon was that commanders in the field were afraid to take casualties, they "valued sparing life over accomplishing the mission."

¶4. (S) Sneh blamed much of this on the mentality bred by the use of the IDF for occupation duty, where operations were more police than military actions. Commanders sent to capture or kill a wanted Palestinian, for example, could decide to wait until the next day since the man would still be there and there was no urgent need to act immediately. Occupation had affected the IDF commanders' determination to wage war, and this -- combined with six years of slashing the defense budget -- had eroded the IDF's combat skills. Sneh summed up that lack of training, due to budget cuts, and the occupation were the source of the IDF's problems.

¶5. (S) Sneh stressed that the MOD had an ambitious plan to reequip, step up training, and invest again in R&D. By the end of summer 2007, Sneh thought the IDF would regain its traditional prowess. The army still enjoyed excellent human resources and high levels of commitment. During the Lebanon war, 110% of reserves had showed up for duty, since many Israeli reservists living abroad or whose service commitments had expired nonetheless had returned to serve. Sneh, who though in his sixties had volunteered to serve with the paratroopers last summer, cited the example of Yitzhak Rabin's grandson, a high tech entrepreneur living in the U.S., who returned to Israel to serve with Sneh in the paratroopers. Defense Minister Peretz was focused on picking the best field commanders, Sneh commented, noting that the new commander of the northern region was "excellent."

¶6. (S) Pointing to a photo on his office wall of Israeli F-15s overflying the site of the Auschwitz death camp, Sneh said that if Israel did not retain its position as a regional superpower, "we should all request green cards." The Middle East, he observed, is a region in which weak minorities either flee or are slaughtered. The Iraqi Kurds were still strong because they were fighters, while Lebanon's once-proud Christians were opening restaurants in the U.S. Israeli Jews would not accept such a fate.

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